

# Lithuanian Vote: Step Toward Soviet Democracy

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MOSCOW, Feb. 24—This weekend, 73 years after the "February revolution" that overthrew czarist autocracy, the Soviet Union takes another step on its long and tortuous road from totalitarianism to democracy.

Voters in the Baltic republic of Lithuania went to the polls today in the first multi-party elections in this country since the Bolsheviks dissolved the constituent assembly in early 1918.

Over the next few weeks, voters across

the Soviet Union will be taking part in a veritable electoral feast, choosing about 1 million deputies in the Soviet Union's republics, regions and localities from more than 3 million candidates. The elections represent the latest stage in President Mikhail Gorbachev's campaign to make public officials more accountable to the people they are supposed to serve.

They also mark a crucial test of strength between the Communist Party *nomenklatura*—the term given to the self-perpetuating oligarchy of bureaucrats that used to fill all responsible posts—and the newly

emerging populist and democratic forces. "This day is a line between the past and the future," said Vytautas Landsbergis, chairman of Lithuania's pro-independence Sąjūdis movement, whose supporters are expected to win a majority in the republic's new Supreme Soviet, or legislature. A senior Lithuanian Communist Party official, Maris Gurmanas, said his party hoped for between 30 and 40 percent of the seats.

The political impact of the elections is likely to be as varied as the Soviet Union itself, a country comprising more than 100

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nationality groups scattered across the vast Eurasian landmass. What happens in Lithuania, in the northwest tip of the world's largest country, is not necessarily a good guide to political trends 11 time zones away in Kamchatka or in the arid deserts of Central Asia.

Annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940, Lithuania and neighboring Latvia and Estonia are well on the way to creating Western-style multi-party systems in which the Communists could be forced into opposition. But the Baltic republics account for less than 3 percent of the Soviet Union's 287 million people and less than 1 percent of its area.

"The transition from totalitarianism toward democracy will be a much longer process here than in Eastern Europe," said Viktor Pastukhov, a Moscow-based political consultant to progressive candidates, speaking of the Russian Republic, by far the largest of the Soviet Union's republics and home to nearly half the country's people. "In Eastern Europe and the Baltic republics, totalitarianism was imposed from the outside. It was a kind of historical coincidence. Here in Russia, however, it was a product of our own history. To free ourselves from the authoritarian way of thinking is going to be much more complicated."

Apart from a few months in 1917, Russia has never had any experience of multi-party democracy. By contrast, political parties flourished in the Baltic states and most East European countries in the 1920s and '30s. Some of the new Baltic political parties are simply a resurrection of old, prewar parties such as the Social Democrats.

Under the Soviet electoral system, a candidate is required to win at least 50 percent of the vote in order to get elected. If no candidate wins 50 percent on the first round, a runoff will be held between the two leading candidates. At least half the electorate must take part in the election for the vote to be valid.

To make political generalizations about a country as vast as the Soviet Union is hazardous. The regional issues that preoccupy 180 million Soviet voters as they head for the polls over the coming weeks are illustrated by the accompanying map and box. Even so, some common themes have emerged as a result of the campaign. They include:

- The power of the Communist party apparatus. Last year, hundreds of Communist loyalists were defeated in nationwide elections for the Congress of People's Deputies, the Soviet Union's new legislature. But the apparatchiks retained their local power bases in cities and towns around the Soviet Union. The Obkom first secretary—the Communist party chief in a given region, or *oblast*—remained the key figure in the state administration, with almost viceregal powers.

The political influence of these regional Communist Party barons is likely to be significantly reduced as power shifts to the elected local and regional councils, called soviets. Some party chiefs—such as the conservative Boris Gidasov in Leningrad—have decided not to take part in the elections for fear of being defeated. Others are running in safe seats in rural areas or, as in the Baltic republics, have radically changed their political views in an attempt to win over the electorate.

The political outlook for the apparatchiks varies greatly from one region to another. In those areas where their opponents are organized, including many big cities, they appear headed for certain defeat. Moscow's Oktyabrskaya region, for example, is likely to elect a progressive slate of candidates headed by Ilya Zaslavsky, who made his name with fiery speeches to the congress.

In smaller towns and rural areas, however, the Communist Party apparatus may succeed in hanging onto power because of the lack of credible opponents and the apathy of the voters.

■ **Voter fatigue.** Public participation in the election campaign has been much lower than during the election campaign for the federal congress last spring. Voters have been bewildered by the plethora of candidates and programs and the number of contests. In some areas, voters will be handed five or six sets of ballot papers with a dozen names on each ballot. In one electoral district in the Ukraine, a record 46 candidates have been nominated.

"People are very passive. Very few bother to come to our meetings," complained Mikhail Lemeshev, a Moscow ecologist campaigning for Russia's "political and economic revival." "Most people don't believe that these elections can improve our desperate economic conditions. I explain this by the fact that the Congress [of People's Deputies] did not justify the hopes placed in it. There

was too much discussion and too few concrete decisions."

"It's not really apathy, it's just that people are no longer so obsessed with elections," countered Yelena Zelinskaya, a political analyst with the independent North-West news agency in Leningrad. "Life has moved on. A year ago, the political candidates were breaking so many taboos. When they mentioned phrases like 'multi-party system' or 'private property,' people snapped to attention. It's not so interesting the second time around."

■ **The emergence of parties.** In most of the Soviet Union, candidates have been campaigning as individuals rather than members of political parties. The result has often been total confusion as voters struggle to keep track of dozens of different candidates.

"We have created a bunch of loners, each of whom wants to be a Don Quixote in his region, destroying bureaucratic windmills. This is not working out and it won't work out in the future," complained Sergei Stankevich, a progressive deputy elected to the federal congress last year.

In order to increase their chances for election, the candidates have been compelled to form alliances that could eventually blossom into full-fledged political parties. Stankevich and others have formed a group called Democratic Russia, endorsing candidates committed to radical change. Russian nationalists who accuse Gorbachev of selling the country out to capitalism have given themselves the label "national patriots." The Greens are another fledgling political group. The vast majority of candidates, however, are running as individuals.

Communist leaders, including Gorbachev, resisted the formation of political parties for many months for ideological reasons. The concentration of power in the hands of the Communist Party, which regarded itself as the historic representative

of the working class, was a fundamental tenet of Leninism. But Kremlin leaders now have reluctantly accepted the phenomenon of competing parties as a logical consequence of political pluralism. They have switched their energy to preventing the emergence of "anti-socialist" parties.

■ **The nationalities.** The question of national autonomy, and even secession from the Soviet Union, has become the dominant political issue in many republics. In many outlying regions—such as the Baltic republics, western Ukraine, Moldavia and the Transcaucasus—people are voting along predominantly ethnic lines. The indigenous population supports popular front movements campaigning for a national revival after years of domination by Moscow. The Russian minority supports "internationalist" candidates who denounce anti-Russian nationalism.

In Russia, up until now, only "national-patriotic" candidates have dared exploit latent feelings of Russian nationalism. In his political program, Moscow ecologist Lemeshev harps on the "economic and social plunder" of Russia by the non-Russian republics. He maintains that Russia spends more than 40 billion rubles a year (the equivalent of half the defense budget) on raw material subsidies to the rest of the Soviet Union. Unfavorable population trends that would make Russians a minority in the Soviet Union within five years are another sore point.

Pastukhov, the political consultant, believes that liberal candidates will soon be forced to address such questions in order to prevent the conservatives from making the nationalism issue their own. "Within a year, the Russian question will be on our political agenda. The [liberals] must also come up with proposals for revitalizing Russian national life. I think we are headed for a great debate between Slavophiles and Westernizers, just like we had in the 19th century," he predicted.